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Working at the edge of chaos?

Dr Irene Stevens



Aims of the session

- Introduce some concepts from complexity theory
- Explore their applicability to residential child care

Task

Group One: What is theory? How useful is it for practice?

Group Two: Name three basic principles which underlie residential child care practice. How do these principles link to theory?

Group Three: Does Residential Child Care have any special theoretical base?

How do we theorise residential child care?

- Discovering a set of fundamental principles for practice?
- A philosophical stance on care and children?
- Legal or political stances justifying the moral positions taken by society?
- Something else?

What does it feel like to work in residential child care?

- *There are many anxieties about dealing with violence on my unit. Young people were persistently being violent and aggressive and many staff went on stress-related leave*
- *I am not stressed. It is the working conditions that are stressed*
(Milligan, Kendrick and Avan, 2004.)
- Edge of chaos?

Complexity theory: what is it?

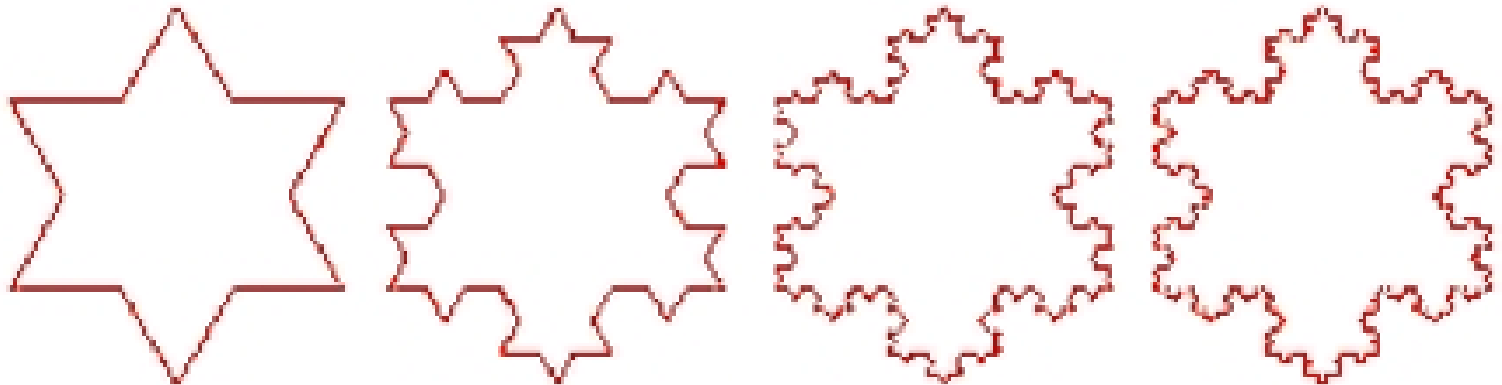
- Complexity theory refers to complex adaptive systems
- Complex adaptive systems are systems which exist on the boundary between stability and chaos
- Social groups like a residential unit are complex adaptive systems

Some basic ideas from complexity theory

- Fractal scaling
- Emergence and non-linear process
- Historicity

Fractal scaling

- Patterns built from repeated shapes following a simple rule



Fractal scaling in residential child care

- Culture of the unit: each level of the fractal is a mirror of the level above
- Approach to risk in the organisation: injury is a fractal therefore fatalities are inevitable (See next two slides)
- Behaviour of a young person: reflects both the unit AND what is happening in the life of the young person

Tsunami

- It is not the first time that a major seismic event in Indonesia has made front-page news around the world. In the 1880s, there was the eruption of Krakatoa. The tsunami in 1883 must have been 40m high, at least. The same geological suture line that caused the recent Sumatran earthquake was responsible for Krakatoa, and the effects, tragic and disastrous, were uncannily similar and world-affecting. (BBC News report, 6th. January, 2005)

Child deaths

- This week's Climbié inquiry report is likely to prove a depressingly familiar experience to many of those who work to protect children. Victoria's tragic case is the latest in a sad roll-call of child deaths, each leading to fresh inquiries. The 1974 enquiry into the death of Maria Colwell saw an inquiry set up to investigate her death. Almost 30 years on, the recommendations of the Maria Colwell inquiry are still all too relevant to Victoria's case. And yet, in the years since, we have had Wayne Brewster, Darren Clarke, Jasmine Beckford, Kimberly Carlile.
(Guardian Online, Sunday January 26, 2003)

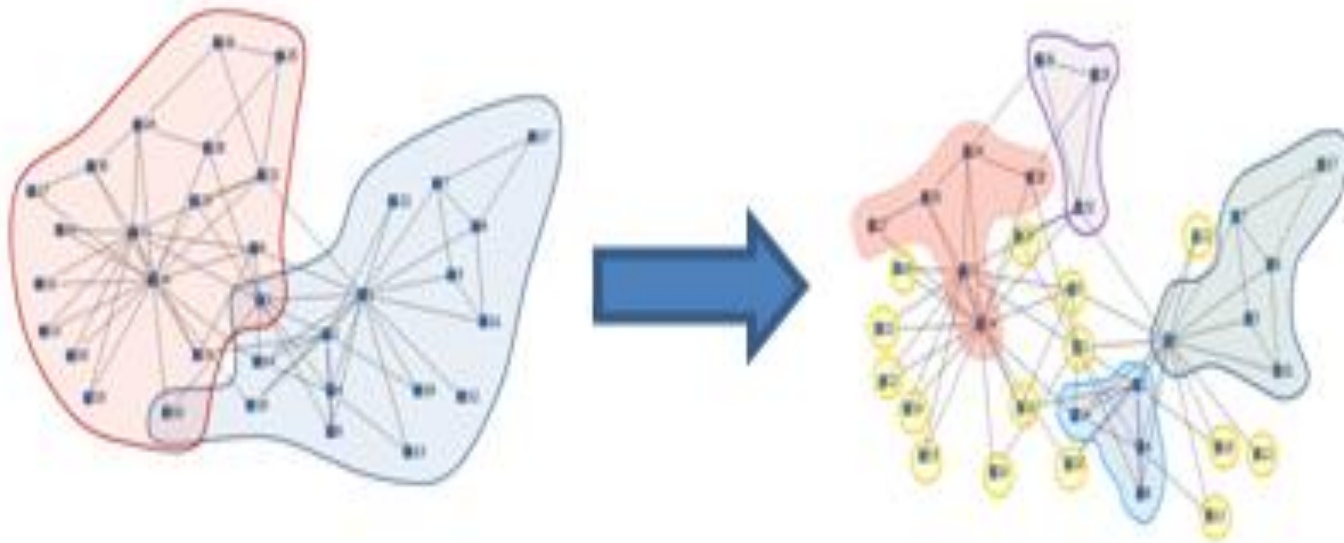
Emergence and non-linear process

- Emergence is the evolution of a new system from its predecessor
- New complex systems do not emerge in a linear fashion (e.g. If A then B)
- Emergence is non-linear (If A then B or C and/or D !!)

Emergence and residential child care

- Risk cannot be eliminated because you cannot predict how a system will emerge
- Linear process leads to a blame culture
- Perceptions of residential child care have changed and will continue to change
- Staff morale and behaviour of young people: this can be improved by the smallest things which may have a disproportionate, non-linear effect

Webs not lines !



Historicity

- Each system has its own history
- Its future evolution depends on what has gone before

Historicity and residential child care

- Organisational change and teambuilding: you need to reflect on the past and where the unit has come from before you can move forward
- Change is difficult for both staff and young people
- The unit is a system but it is also a sub-system of the wider organisation so this has to be understood too

In conclusion

- Small group care units are complex systems which will exhibit features of the laws of complexity theory
- Life in residential child care is unpredictable and sometimes chaotic but the laws of complexity help us to understand why this is so
- Practice in the moment !

Further reading

- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The Tipping Point*. New York: Back Bay Books.
- Gribben, J. (2004). *Deep Simplicity*. London: Penguin Books.
- Stevens and Hassett(2007). Applying complexity to risk in child protection. *Childhood*